

SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS CLASSROOM

Critical Family History, Identity, and Historical Memory

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Many teacher educators recommend that preservice teachers examine their own backgrounds and experiences to identify assumptions, beliefs, and values, as well as cultural contexts in which they grew up, which impact on how they understand schooling and students. As Pinar noted, “Self-examination precedes the self-understanding, which precedes self-mobilization” (2004, 55) of teachers who can cultivate intellectual development of a widely diverse student populace. Commonly, Social Foundations courses initiate self-examination through processes such as life history and autobiography. Self-examination is particularly important as a part of learning to teach students who are culturally different from oneself, and to address institutionalized inequities that permeate students’ lives both inside and outside of school.

For years, I have worked to help teachers (both preservice and inservice) understand themselves as cultural beings, and to understand institutional discrimination well enough to recognize and challenge it in schools. Like many other teacher educators, I have found this work to be daunting, particularly with White preservice teachers, who generally see themselves as standing outside of, rather than in relationship to, multiculturalism (Asher 2005). I have used various strategies to help my students examine themselves culturally, but their tendency to reify categories of identity and their superficial understanding of history too often have led to

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shallow examinations. I have wondered: How might these limited understandings serve as jump-off points for a deeper analysis?

Recently, out of personal rather than professional interest, I began to research my own family history. In doing so, I explored how this process can work as an *entrée* into historical memory about race, ethnicity, and identity—revealing the ways in which power and privilege have been constructed, the prices people have paid for that, and the ways in which ordinary people have challenged inequities. In this article, I describe the process I used for researching family history, situating that process within a discussion of self-excavation through critical life history.

CRITICAL LIFE HISTORY

White preservice teachers' disinterest in or resistance toward examining culture and equity stems partially from seeing these as other people's concerns. A view of "us" and "them" is bolstered by assuming a unified view of self-identity that does not recognize, in Norquay's words, "multiple subject positions from which [people] make sense of their world" (1990, 291). Norquay argued that what we remember and forget about our lives rests on an assumption of what constitutes normalcy within relationships of unequal institutional power. She wrote, "The process through which we work ourselves into positions in mainstream society as 'normal' may entail the silencing and forgetting of experiences in our childhood that do not fit the position we strive to maintain" (293). Norquay suggested that using life history research to tap into contradictory subject positions embedded within our lives that have been covered over and often forgotten may open up possibilities for disrupting institutionalized power relationships. In this way, life history research can serve as a springboard to self-understanding and transforms teaching (Aveling 1991; Norquay 1990; Pinar 2004).

Although many teacher educators use life and family history to encourage preservice teachers to see themselves culturally, life stories are not necessarily transformative or insightful. Grumet (1990) cautioned against falling into a "patronizing sentimentality" that marginalizes experience by not taking it seriously. Similarly, Sharkey (2004) cautioned against "uncritical celebration of stories" (496), which Aveling described as "me-too-ism" when Whites try uncritically to be ethnic in response to identity work of people of color (2001, 43).

Critical autobiography, critical storytelling, and critical life history attend to connections between an individual life and its social and political context (Barone 1992). In critical approaches to self-examination, personal and family experience is the beginning of a research process rather than the culmination. For example, Hollins had her predominantly White preservice teachers examine their cultural heritage to discover ways in which their own ancestors "suffered as victims of bias

and prejudice at various times in history" (1990, 202), beginning with research into the origins of their family surnames. In Hollins' experience, as the students peeled back layers of family history, many began to recognize ways in which their ancestors gave up identity to become "American." Afterward, she found them more open to discussing culture, ethnicity, and race.

Deconstructing identity, personal history, and conceptual systems used to interpret these concepts opens up a "pedagogy of possibility" (Aveling 2001, 46), as Hollins' (1990) work illustrates. In what follows, I explore, using critical life history to research, one strand of my own family history, illustrating ruptures in assumptions about race, ethnicity, and "we-they" distinctions that this research process can uncover. I then return to the questions of how such a process might ignite pedagogies of possibility in Social Foundations.

EUROPEAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES: HISTORY FORGOTTEN

Like most White Americans, I grew up learning an unproblematic, unified sense of myself as White. I grew up in an all-White town in southern Oregon (that is, with the exception of a Chinese-American family), only dimly aware of its status as a "sundown town" in which African American people could not live (Loewen 2005b). My mother, when my siblings and I asked about our "nationality," would reel off a list of national origins—German, Scots-Irish, French, English, and a bit of Cherokee, usually making light of the whole question. I also grew up learning a fairly unproblematized set of racial categories and understandings about race in U.S. history, reflected in the themes of U.S. history textbooks. For example, I learned that racism ended with the Emancipation Proclamation, that American Indians were "noble" figures in history, and that U.S. history is largely a story of steady progress toward freedom and justice (Loewen 2005a).

For Americans of European descent, ethnic ancestry diminishes in importance as people intermarry across national origins. Generally, people of mixed European American backgrounds simplify their ethnic identity, selectively forgetting some ethnic roots. For example, based on an analysis of U.S. census data, Lieberman and Waters (1993) found parents of 40% of children of mixed European American marriages (e.g. German-English) to report only one, rather than both, ancestries. As ethnic ancestry diminishes in importance, the concept of culture takes on increasingly simplified meanings. Based on interview studies, Waters (1990) and Alba (1990) concluded that most White Americans look to ethnicity as a source of pleasure, enrichment, or uniqueness, for example through holidays and ethnic food. At the same time, most Whites—particularly those of mixed European

backgrounds—view White ethnicity as cultureless. For example, in a study of how White women in the U.S. view race, racial dominance, and White identity, Frankenberg found them aware of and uncomfortable with racial inequality, but unable to examine it other than through “long-established modes of cultural description” (1993, 196). Drawing on the language of culture, they could describe “others” as cultural, but their own identity remained “amorphous and indescribable” (196). They could, to varying degrees, name European ancestral roots, but most saw these as relatively insignificant to their identity. Other studies report a similar cultureless understanding that White Americans apply to themselves, along with vague feelings of missing something because they do not seem to belong to a group (see also Kincheloe 1999; Marx 2006; McIntyre 1997; Perry 2001; Wellman [1977] 1993).

Although European Americans, especially those of mixed ancestry, minimize the importance of ethnicity, in the absence of historical understanding of racism and European ancestors’ experiences with discrimination, ethnicity provides a template for misunderstanding race and denying the profound impact of racism, violence on which the U.S. was constructed, and exploitation of people of color, on which many Whites built wealth (Alba 1990; Jacobson 2006). Although Jews of European descent share a collective memory of the Holocaust, most other European Americans do not connect their own ethnicity with persecution (Blumenfeld 2006). Nor do they acknowledge a history of perpetrating racial persecution. Waters notes that European Americans see ethnicity as “flexible and symbolic and voluntary” (1990, 156), assuming it to have the same meaning for everyone else.

European Americans then reinterpret history around a simplified European immigrant narrative, solidifying the process of forgetting exploitation and conquest (Jacobson 2006). For example, in a study of Napa County, California, Heidenreich (2004) found that White Americans did not start arriving in significant numbers until about 1840, when the area was still part of Mexico. Drawing on the context of the war with Mexico, European Americans of diverse ethnic origins created a myth of the Bear Flag Republic that emphasized similarity among, and superiority of, people of European descent, set explicitly in contrast to Indians, Mexicans, and Blacks. Regardless of where they had come from, the myth of the Bear Flag Republic constructed Whites as heroic pioneers within a storyline of progress. This myth—which is currently part of the California History Social Science Standards for fourth grade—became one of the ways that people of diverse European backgrounds melded, “forgot” history, and came to see themselves as just “American.”

As Bonnett put it, the project of shifting from European identities to White made “history and geography disappear” in historical memory (1998, 1049). Critical family history can serve as a tool for making history and geography reappear, when coupled with research that situates family members in a social and cultural context. Without that specific historical research, however, family history can

end up reaffirming a generalized, and often fictionalized, immigrant narrative (Jacobson 2006).

CLAIMING HISTORICAL MEMORY

I began my quest by constructing a family tree that went back as far as possible. To trace individual family members, I used on-line databases available mainly through Ancestry.com and the Church of Latter Day Saints. Using these databases, I was able to locate copies of records such as census data, marriage records, death certificates, and newspaper articles with which to construct most of my family tree, going back roughly five generations, and fill in assorted details such as where people lived, the work they did, and their parents' birthplace.

To interpret these data, I situated each person within a historical and social context by using histories that described and analyzed the specific locale and time in which the person lived. I constructed a three-column chart. Down the left-hand column were chronological details about individual ancestors gleaned from databases. In the middle column I described local historical contexts in relationship to specific family members, working roughly in decades. The right-hand column described social and cultural contexts, including additional accounts by historians regarding the diverse peoples who lived in the area of each ancestor.

In the following, I discuss what I learned while trying to locate the Cherokee ancestor in my mother's list of ethnic origins. My mother's mother—whose photos depict dark hair, black eyes, and olive complexion—descended from the Scots-Irish McCaslins and the Anglo Harrises of the east Tennessee mountains. Although I had never heard this side of my family described as Appalachian, the counties in which they were born and raised—McMinn and Monroe—are in the heart of Appalachia. I came to realize that Appalachia, which I had grown up seeing as having nothing to do with me, is actually a part of my family story that was probably intentionally forgotten because of its poverty and my grandparents' strong desire to become middle class.

The McCaslins and the Harrises lived on land that had been part of the Cherokee Nation, which, at the time of European invasion, had spanned all of what is now Tennessee and Kentucky, and much of what is now the Carolinas and Georgia. By the early 1800s, when the McCaslins and the Harrises began to appear in U.S. census data, the Cherokee Nation still included southeastern Tennessee, a corner of western North Carolina, and northern Georgia. According to Byrum (1984), Cherokees and Europeans had intermarried frequently, particularly in the region that is now McMinn County. In 1829, however, when gold was discovered on Cherokee land in Georgia, the U.S. government forcibly deported the Cherokees west on a journey that came to be known as the Trail of Tears. Although many White east-Tennesseans at the time protested their forced expulsion (Byrum 1984),

my ancestors, who were farmers, surely profited subsequently by having access to Cherokee land.

I wondered if my mother's mother might be a descendent of a Cherokee-European family. Unable to locate records of such a family, I decided to undergo DNA testing to confirm or disconfirm the story of Cherokee ancestry. To my surprise, I discovered that my ancestry is about 94% European and 6% sub-Saharan African! The story I learned of Cherokee ancestry had been invented to hide Black ancestry, which, as it turns out, had been a common strategy. According to Everett, historically the term "Cherokee Indian Princess" was a "contrived defense mechanism employed by both light- and dark-pigmented individuals of partial African heritage to hide or disguise racial identity in an oppressive social climate where skin color essentially determined one's legal status" (1999, 369).¹ My search shifted from Cherokee ancestry to Black ancestry of offspring who eventually passed as White, but concocted the story of Cherokee ancestry to explain dark coloring.

Between the time it was first taken in 1790 until 1850, the U.S. census made available three racial/ethnic categories: free White, all other free, and slave. Roughly 90% of the population of east Tennessee was White, 9% were slaves, and 1% were other free (Stuckert 1993). Most White Appalachians did not own slaves, due partially to mountainous terrain that could support small farms rather than plantations. There was, however, a small slave-holding elite; George C. Harris, very likely my great-great-great-grandfather, owned 3 slaves in 1840 and 5 in 1850. I may well descend from a slave-owner, a story that had disappeared from family memory. If so, not only was any wealth that was passed down generated on land taken from Cherokees, but it was also built on slave labor.

Might my mother's mother have descended from racial mixing in the Harris family? There is a long history of White slave masters taking sexual advantage of slave women. In Appalachia, there was also more blurring of lines between free Whites and slaves than elsewhere in the South (Inscoc 1989). Possibly a racially-mixed Harris ancestor was born of a liaison between slave and White, then adopted into the Harris family. George C. Harris, who spent his life in Tennessee, had at least three Harris children who were all classified as White, born in Arkansas. One was my great-great-grandfather DeWitt Harris. Maybe one day I will learn why a Tennessee family had three children born in Arkansas at a time when their mother, as reported in the U.S. Census, was in her mid-fifties.

Mixing between people of African descent and the Scots-Irish was also not uncommon. Imes (1919) notes that many Scots-Irish were poor, eking out a living on rocky soil. For economic reasons, they often mingled with slaves, sometimes "in the quilting, husking, barn-raising, and other rural festivities, being undoubtedly made welcome" (272). The McCaslins, who according to census records owned some land but were poorer than the Harrises, may have mingled with slaves or free Blacks, as Imes described.

Accounts of relationships between free Blacks and Whites in Appalachia vary, probably because relationships themselves varied from cordial to antagonistic (Inscoc 1995). Until the 1830s, free mountain people had mixed, which is evident in the existence of mixed families today (Reed 1997). It is likely that I will never uncover exactly who mixed with whom, mainly because by the time race determined rights, regardless of whether one was free, people were using various strategies to avoid being classified as Black, mulatto, colored, or anything else that would deprive them of rights.

East-Tennesseans were much less enthusiastic about slavery than most of the rest of the South. In the late 1820s, antislavery societies were active in the state. However, in 1834, following the Nat Turner rebellion, Tennessee disenfranchised its free citizens of color until shortly after the Civil War. On the 1840 census, many in east Tennessee who had been "free colored" in the 1830 census, classified themselves as White (Reed 1997). Appalachia is home to groups of dark-skinned people whose racial/ethnic origins are simply unclear, referred to by terms such as "Brass Ankles" in South Carolina and "Melungeon" in Tennessee. Free mixed race people have been classified in various ways on the census—as White or "other free" prior to 1850, and as White, Black, or Mulatto starting in 1850. All of my ancestors that I have been able to identify were classified as White in the census. As Davis points out, "American mestizo" groups (mix-race people with African ancestry) used a variety of strategies to protect themselves, including passing as White, migrating to other regions where they are not known, or adopting an Indian identity (1989, 136–7).

During Reconstruction, the one-drop rule emerged as the universal definition of who counts as Black, and by the mid-1870s, states were beginning to pass what came to be known as "Jim Crow" laws that enforced segregation and White privileges. Tennessee's first "separate but equal" law was passed in 1881, ironically as a means to protect Blacks from discrimination. In 1867, the Tennessee legislature had passed a law prohibiting racial discrimination in public services; it was overturned in 1875. The 1881 law ensured Blacks access to services such as railroads, but in separate facilities. In the context of the times, this purported protection subsequently led to an erosion of Blacks' rights (Folmsbee 1949).

Between 1880 and 1885, my great-grandparents abruptly left East Tennessee and relocated to the hamlet of Yampa, Colorado, south of Steamboat Springs, where they appeared on the 1885 U.S. census. Great-grandmother Celesta was only 17, and great-grandfather Oliver was 21. Colorado, taken from Mexico in 1848, became a U.S. state in 1876. In 1881, the Ute Indians were forced out of the Yampa River Valley and relocated to a reservation in Utah. Three White men set up a hunting camp that same year in what became Yampa, and recruited some White families to settle. By 1885, Yampa had a population of 37 people in six households, one of which was my great-grandparents'. Oliver reported being from

Switzerland, and Celesta from Germany. I suspect they left Tennessee to escape Jim Crow, and concocted stories about where they were from to explain the not-quite-Anglo appearance of one or both of them. There is irony in their proclaiming themselves to be European to escape racial segregation laws, and later saying one or both was part Cherokee, while setting up a home on land that had been taken from the Utes less than five years earlier.

Embedded in this slice of family history are multiple identities and subject positions that previously had not been available to me. I carry a history and legacy of not only European American immigration, but also of Appalachia, of slave ownership, of African Americans passing as White and leaving family behind, and of Jim Crow. I recovered lost memories of blurred racial boundaries and reinvented origins, lost narratives of having both perpetrated and also having been victimized by racism. What I have gained from this research is a broader sense of who “my” people are, what my legacy is, and responsibilities and debts I have inherited. The challenge facing me now is not to rewrite history, but to reinterpret the present and my position in it in relationship to history.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS

Pedagogies of possibility speak to where we go from here, in light of the past and our positions within the past and present. Multicultural education, although it has challenged definitions about who counts as American and what constitutes American culture, too often leaves White teachers feeling left out of pedagogies of possibility. As noted earlier, studies of White teachers bear out that many not only have a shallow historical consciousness about race and racism and conceptions of culture and White identity, but also report discomfort discussing these things (Marx 2006; McIntyre 1997). To address this issue, many multicultural teacher educators have their students, a majority of whom are usually White, engage in a critical analysis of their own lives, examining themselves as culturally and historically located beings (see for example, Dillard 1996; Kumashiro 2004; Lea 2004; Marx 2006). When I had used family history and cultural autobiography with preservice teachers in the past, many decontextualized their family stories, adopting the “heroic individual” narrative that is common in textbooks (Loewen 2005a), producing in the process uncritical celebrations and “me-too-isms” (Aveling 2001, 43). My attempts to direct their attention toward possible silences were often interpreted as me, the professor, trying to change their stories.

Our stories are our own stories, but they need to be informed. The turning point informing my story came when I began to research the historic and cultural contexts of peoples’ lives, asking (1) who else lived in the county or town; and (2) what political, economic, and social relationships existed among groups at that time. When I looked into those questions, family history research took a critical

turn that plunged below the surface of remembered origins. My family's story was now situated within a historic context that I needed to investigate to understand it. Jacobson challenged those of us of European descent,

to devise a narrative line which can take account of racial changeability—to construct a drama whose first-act Celts, Slavs, and Ugro-Finns can reemerge as Caucasians before the final curtain, without diminishing *either* the power and the significance of that transformation for their ultimate social standing *or* the very real distinctions that had held sway and had structured their experience along the way. The challenge is not only to recognize the fluidity of race, but to find ways of narrating events, social movements, and the trajectory of individual lives in all their integrity along the convoluted path of an ever-shifting racial reality (1998, 275).

Social Foundations courses are an excellent place to learn critical family history. Teacher educators who choose to work on family history projects, however, must be mindful that students come from a wide variety of family backgrounds and structures. We cannot assume the two-parent, heterosexual, biologically-based family as the norm. Students should be offered a wide variety of options that allow as much or as little revelation about families as students wish. Options may include historical research on someone a student admires, but is not his or her own ancestor.²

Through sharing researched stories, teacher education students can experience the multiple strands that make up history, the multiple subject positions that each of us inhabits, and the multiple lines of action open to us as teachers. It is important not to attempt to draw sweeping generalizations from any story, but rather to allow the stories to converse, and the disjunctures to sit alongside one another, generating questions for further consideration. Then, for teachers, the question needs to become: Given who we are and where we came from, how do we proceed from here?

NOTES

1. This is not to deny mixing among Cherokees and Whites; before they were forcibly removed, many Cherokees and Whites had intermarried. However, Everett (1999) points out that family stories of Cherokee ancestry sometimes cover over Black ancestry.
2. Uncovering suppressed family memories can be unsettling, which teacher educators should anticipate. DNA testing can disrupt some people's sense of self. For example, as much as one-third of the White population in the U.S. may have detectable Black ancestry (Passing 2007). Other information can also turn out to be disturbing. Several years ago, one of my White students,

while completing a family history project similar in another course, found a photo of family ancestors participating in a Ku Klux Klan event, and was quite distraught at this discovery. Although I believe that discomforting findings are part and parcel of delving into history honestly, teacher educators need to be prepared to help students deal with what they find out.

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